

## Style in Latin Poetry

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## Volume 159

# **Style in Latin Poetry**



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and Stephen Harrison

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Chiara Battistella

# The Style of Evil in Seneca's *Medea*

**Abstract:** Style is a salient feature of Seneca's production, in both the philosophical and the poetic corpus. This paper specifically focuses on the play *Medea* with a view to suggesting that there may be a functional correspondence between the character's stylistic choices and the dramatic action.

## 1 Introduction

Epistle 114 to Lucilius is often cited as the most indicative text to present Seneca's stance on style with a special focus on philosophical writing. It contains the well-known proverbial phrase *talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita* (114.1), in which the correspondence between the author's life and his speech (or, in other words, style as an index of character) suggests that it is the character of the mind that determines and gives shape to the character of the style.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will look at some speeches in Seneca's *Medea* from a stylistic viewpoint, seeking not to lose sight of the above-mentioned statement, in order to verify whether it may apply not just to Senecan philosophical writing but also to his tragic poetry.

## 2 Words and emotions in Seneca's *Medea*

Style appears as a salient feature in Seneca's plays, especially owing to their excess of rhetoricity by means of which the author confers exceptional prominence on *verba* over *res*. However, rhetoricity should not be dismissed as a merely decorative trait of Seneca's dramatic style since it is key to structuring the action and articulating the sequence of the drama's main moments.<sup>2</sup> The armoury of rhetoric and stylistic techniques that the playwright displays in his tragedies (*Medea*

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I warmly thank the editors for inviting me to contribute to this volume and providing useful comments on this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> See Merchant 1905; Setaioli 1985; Graver 2014, 282–283. The wise man always follows nature; consequently, in the Stoic view, excellence in writing depends on conformity to nature. See also Traina 2011, 46.

<sup>2</sup> Boyle 2014, xliv.

included) serves a dramatic purpose, in that it contributes to portraying states of mind and, thus, creating powerful tragic characters.<sup>3</sup> As Boyle duly observes, ‘in Medea’s rapid exchange with her Nurse (*Med.* 150–167) — rhetorical, sententious, at times stichomythic, even antilabic (i.e. with divided verse-lines) — the Nurse’s barrage of commonplaces and epigram is not only thrown back in her face but used as a springboard for Medea’s redefinition of herself.’<sup>4</sup> In this regard, let us consider lines 164–167:

NU. Abiere Colchi, coniugis nulla est fides  
 nihilque superest opibus e tantis tibi.  
 ME. Medea superest, hic mare et terras vides  
 ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina.

Medea’s retort to the nurse effectively highlights her impressive self-identification with nature’s elements and, therefore, anticipates the attitude of striking self-confidence that she will display throughout the tragedy: her stylistic choices, such as the repetition of *superest* and the following ‘catalogue’ marked by a cosmic tint and polysyndeton (*et ... -que ... et ... et ... et*), should not be considered as purely ornamental exaggeration since they strongly contribute to the dramatisation of the character’s ethos. In Seneca’s tragedies, therefore, style can be construed as a powerful instrument of identity construction and definition, as will be argued below.

It has been abundantly acknowledged that Seneca’s Medea is a remarkably strong-willed and ‘exhibitionist’ character, all the more so if compared to her Euripidean counterpart. Starting from this premise, I intend to look at her *verba* within the play especially with a view to bringing to the fore some of the distinctive features of her ‘idiolect’ as a tragic villain.<sup>5</sup> She interacts with all the other *dramatis personae* of the play except for the chorus, an exclusion typical of

<sup>3</sup> Boyle 2014, xlvi (he speaks of dramatisation of minds).

<sup>4</sup> Boyle 2014, xlvi. See also: ‘Seneca’s dramatic style [...] is a major instrument of profound interiority, enabling the Roman dramatist to achieve a non-Greek focus on the psychologies behind the masks’. As happens elsewhere in Seneca’s tragic corpus, the repartee of *sententiae* at 157–176 serves the purpose of bringing to the fore the emotional attitude that pervades the play, namely Medea’s anger, but also her extraordinary qualities (see Mastronarde 1970, 293 on Seneca’s *Oedipus*).

<sup>5</sup> It would be interesting to look from this research perspective at the style and language of other villains in Seneca’s plays in order to show whether they share significant stylistic and linguistic ‘habits’, a sort of common ‘style of evil’ (Atreus could certainly be an ‘authoritative’ example); however, this investigation goes beyond the scope of the present pages.

Seneca's tragedies, unlike their Greek models.<sup>6</sup> The prologue in the *Medea* is a conspicuously bombastic opening, differing from that of Euripides' *Medea* especially in that the protagonist is given voice from the very outset of the play.<sup>7</sup> The Senecan *Medea* is not someone who shies away from the spotlight: the nurse and the chorus need not urge her to get out of the house and take the floor like in Euripides' *Medea* (180–186; 214–215). In the Latin prologue, her character is already on stage when the tragedy starts, ready to put in play a variegated array of rhetorical strategies. Prominent among these are a stylistically elaborate invocation of the gods and the employment of violent imagery and sententious diction,<sup>8</sup> as for example in the last line, *quae scelere parta est, scelere linquenda est domus* (55). This *sententia*, thanks to its brevity and closural position,<sup>9</sup> seals in a quite vivid way the character's first appearance and creates dramatic expectation.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the sententious colour with which the Senecan *Medea* rounds off her speech seems to 'refine' the concept expressed by the Euripidean *Medea* in a generalising maxim at the end of her first intervention on stage (265–266):<sup>11</sup> 'but when she [*scil.* a woman] is injured in love, no mind is more murderous than hers'.<sup>12</sup> The image of blood brought about by the Greek adjective *μιαφρονωτέρα*<sup>13</sup> is replaced in the Roman version by the emphatic repetition of the term *scelus*, strengthened by the trope of parallelism. Moreover, the use of *parta*, hinting at the language of parturition, pointedly brings to the fore, from the very outset, the narrow (though allusive) connection between *Medea*'s forthcoming revenge and her offspring

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6 In Seneca's play, there is no direct interaction or interlocution between *Medea* and the chorus, which is rather hostile to her. Therefore, *Medea* has no recourse to rhetorical techniques to achieve solidarity from the chorus as in Euripides' tragedy. The non-integration of the chorus and its lack of dramatic function are distinctive traits of the Senecan tragedies (cf. Zanobi 2014, 83–84).

7 'Seneca's prologues are normally of great importance for setting forth both the mood of the poem and the key-words associated with it' (Mastronarde 1970, 292).

8 See Setaioli 1985, 815 on the *sententia* as a means to 'deteriorate' the architecture of Cicero's sentences. *Sententiae* are amongst of the most quintessential features of the declamatory style of early imperial Roman literature. See also Traina 2011, 25–27; 78.

9 Boyle 2014, 130–131.

10 See von Albrecht 2014, 742 on *sententiae* as an instrument of philosophical education: 'But how does one make a quoted sentence or maxim really "one's own"? One should live it, not just pronounce it (*epist.* 108.38)'. *Mutatis mutandis*, *Medea* too seeks to make the content of her maxims come true.

11 In Euripides' play, *Medea*'s voice is only heard from within the house until line 214. Her concluding words to the chorus open up a range of interpretive possibilities, on which see Mastronarde 2002, 217.

12 Translations are from Kovacs 1994.

13 'Striking and emphatic' (Mastronarde 2002, 217).

(cf. also 25–26 *parta iam, parta ultio est: / peperit*),<sup>14</sup> which is absent from the corresponding scene at the beginning of Euripides' play.

In Seneca's play, readers can envisage some connection between Medea's style and her personality: her powerful emotional turbulence, for example, is mirrored in the inner tension of her speech at 397–424.<sup>15</sup> The nurse has just described her mistress' *furor* in the lines above utilising the image of an overflowing wave (*ubi se iste fluctus franget? exundat furor*, 392):<sup>16</sup> Medea's following speech seems indeed to be pervaded by that same wave, owing to the relentless rhythm of the sentences. Just as she is no ordinary woman, so too her fury is, in metaphorical terms, no ordinary *fluctus* since neither rushing rivers nor stormy seas nor fire could restrain it (411–414):<sup>17</sup>

non rapidus amnis, non procellosum mare  
Pontusve Coro saevus aut vis ignium  
adiuta flatu possit inhibere impetum  
irasque nostras: sternam et evertam omnia.

*Impetus* is a recurring term in the text, constantly referring to Medea's uncontrollable emotions, which will trigger a spiral of violence throughout the play (cf. 157; 381; 413; 895; 903). The term also has a strong Stoic flavour, being the Latin rendition of the Greek ὀρμή and meaning a movement of the mind towards action or, in other words, the impulse following the mind's assent to an impression, obviously a false one.<sup>18</sup> However, I wonder whether there may also be some further connotation in the passage above. *Impetus* and *ira* are the two driving forces that animate Medea's actions, but they are also likely to function as a creative impulse in giving shape to her wording. The destructive words she utters at line 414

<sup>14</sup> See Boyle 2014, 117–118 and line 50. Medea's words and intentions are still opaque in the prologue, but nevertheless they hint at the filicide to come. See also Fantham 1982, 204 on Medea containing in herself the motive power of the tragic action and, thus, hinting in the prologue at horrors of which she herself is not yet fully conscious. On the *Steigerung* {'intensification'} effect, see Billerbeck 1988, 123.

<sup>15</sup> Medea's speech is likely to be an 'open soliloquy', as Boyle 2014, 235 points out.

<sup>16</sup> The association of the emotion of anger with a wave is not novel: see Boyle 2014, 233–234. For this image see also Harrison 2013, 215–228. Lines 380–396 contains the nurse's detailed description of Medea's emotions. Such kind of descriptions is generally much briefer in Greek tragedy (see Tietze Larson 1994, 59).

<sup>17</sup> On Medea setting her emotions, especially her *ira*, in competitive conflict with weather events or natural phenomena, see Slaney 2019, 73. See also Pratt 1983, 90–91: 'The annihilating effect of Medea's rage is profusely conveyed in the metaphors of fire and sea storm. She is a flaming storm of passion buffeting the cosmos'.

<sup>18</sup> See Boyle 2014, lv; 168; 353.



*sternam et evertam omnia* appear as a direct emanation of her *impetus*, which thus comes to instantiate a privileged source of inspiration for her tragic diction<sup>19</sup> (*Medea's* promise that she will subvert the universe finds a counterpart at line 739 *mundus vocibus primis tremat*, when she adds her dreadful words to the venoms she is concocting [737–738; on this cf. further below]).<sup>20</sup> It is worth noticing that the nurse employs the same vocabulary, that is the same key words *impetus* and *ira*, a few lines earlier while inviting her mistress to control her anger and curb her impulse: *resiste et iras comprime ac retine impetum* (381). She then proceeds to depict *Medea's* behaviour in some celebrated lines (382–396), which have long been the object of scholarly attention owing to their noticeable similarity with the description of the angry man in Seneca's *De Ira* 1.1.3–5, in particular the following extract, dealing with the pre-verbal / non-verbal 'communicative' acts of the *iratus*: *gemitus mugitusque et parum explanatis vocibus sermo praeruptus* (cf. also 2.35.3 *rabida vocis eruptio colla distendit*; 2.35.5 *sibilo mugituque et gemitu et stridore et si qua his invisior vox est perstreptentem*). The nurse refers to *Medea's* speech acts of cursing as follows, hinting at their arguably pre-verbal and chaotic features (387–390):

flammata facies, spiritum ex alto citat,  
proclamat, oculos uberi fletu rigat,  
[...]  
haeret: minatur, aestuat, queritur, gemit.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Impetus* can be used to signify 'inspiration', like e.g. in Sen. *Ben.* 7.8.2 *eloquentiae vero eius, quae res fortissimas deceat, non concinnatae nec in verba sollicitae, sed ingenti animo, prout impetus tulit, res suas prosequenti*.

<sup>20</sup> Her words are defined *metuenda* at 738, which can be related to *tremenda* at 46, where the participial adjective is referred to her evil thoughts (a similar idea of terror is conveyed by *tremat* at 738).

<sup>21</sup> I wonder whether this line, despite its topical content, may be indebted to Aesch. *Eum.* 117–130, in which the Erinyes utter non-verbal cries in their sleep, such as moans and groans. There is no exact correspondence between the Aeschylean and the Senecan scene; however, *Medea* is represented as a Fury in the play, full of anger and committed to violent revenge like the goddesses in the Greek play (see Costa 1973, 109 on *Furor* at 396 'virtually = *Furiae*'). With reference to Sen. *Med.* 391–392 *quo pondus animi verget? ubi ponet minas? / ubi se iste flucus franget?*, in which *Medea's* nurse employs the metaphors of a balance and of the sea to talk about her mistress' *furor*, I wonder whether commentators fail to notice a possible analogy with the epilogue of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* (1075–1076), where the chorus, after Orestes has fled owing to the Erinyes' sudden appearance, rounds off the play with a similar phraseology: ποῖ δῆτα κρανεῖ, ποῖ καταλήξει / μετακομισθὲν μένος ἄτης; (there is also conceptual resemblance).

However, once Medea has taken again the floor right after the nurse's description, she appears perfectly capable of articulating and mastering speech: although she continues to be in a state of furious anger, she employs several stylistic and rhetorical artifices. After resorting to the technique of self-address (397–398), she composes a long period with several clauses containing cosmic references<sup>22</sup> to express the immutability of both the eternal processes of the natural world and her own *furor* (401–407). She then constructs other two quite elaborate sentences pointing to the exceptional character of her rage (407–414) and rounds them off with the menacing promise that she will destroy everything (*sternam et evertam omnia*, 414),<sup>23</sup> as already observed above. Next, she moves on to talk about Jason and, after an effectively sententious line (*amor timere nemitem verus potest*, 416), lingers over the following concession (417–419): even supposing that he has been coerced to marry Creon's daughter, he should first have informed Medea as his wife. She pursues a flawless (and very lucid) line of reasoning, which seems to jar with the nurse's previous description of her frenzied emotional state. Also, Medea, in the closing words of her speech, again has recourse to the future of resolve, in particular at 424–425 *invadam deos / et cuncta quatiam*, which replicates as a sort of disquieting refrain the same concept expressed at line 414, but this time with a notable variation: *deos* at 424 is obviously an extremely threatening and hybriatic addition.<sup>24</sup> Boyle duly signals the extra force given to the phrase by stopping the verse and stresses the use of a half-line for theatrical effect.<sup>25</sup> Medea, despite being undeniably infuriated, clearly exhibits rhetorical awareness of her stylistic choices: she, therefore, appears to be in full control of her speech acts.

Quite surprisingly, Medea's words are feared even more than her actions in the play. In the prologue, she complains about the alleged uselessness of her words, *querelas verbaque in cassum sero?* (26), but she immediately overcomes this sense of impotence by addressing her *animus* and spurring it on to banish female fears through self-persuasion (42–43).<sup>26</sup> Neither Medea's *ira* nor her

<sup>22</sup> On the irony of Medea's assertion, see Boyle 2014, 236.

<sup>23</sup> Boyle 2014, 238 defines the future tense of the two verbs as 'future of resolve', which reflects Medea's sense of agency (cf. also 118–119).

<sup>24</sup> Variation is a well-attested *Stilfigur* {stylistic device} in Seneca's tragedies in all its forms (repetition of a concept by means of synonyms or through theme and variation): see Billerbeck 1988, 101–108. In the lines quoted above, it occurs at some distance, at 414 and 425.

<sup>25</sup> Boyle 2014, 240.

<sup>26</sup> In his philosophical works, Seneca has frequent recourse to rhetorical strategies aimed at persuasion. His language is often characterised by rhetorical questions, use of irony, commentary on the action, and sustained apostrophes, as D'Alessandro Behr 2021, 231 observes. The

*verba* can be restrained, as emerges from the first intense exchange between her and the nurse (157–173), in which the servant tries to quench her mistress' outburst of anger (*compesce verba / animosque minue*, 174–175). It is precisely in this dialogue, as already pointed out above, that Medea overtly proclaims her 'all-encompassing' identity, also resorting to the rhetorical technique of self-naming.<sup>27</sup> Medea's words are a direct expression of her exceptional personality, as emerges later in the play from the nurse's account of the gruesome incantation scene: *addit venenis verba non illis minus / metuenda. sonuit ecce vesano gradu / canitque. mundus vocibus primis tremet* (737–739). These lines may remind the reader of Erichtho's similarly dreadful voice in Lucan. 6.685–686 *tum vox Lethaeos cunctis pollentior herbis / excantare deos*. Both Medea's and Erichtho's utterances are frightening because of the ritual of black magic the two witches are practising (they are likely to be magical formulae). Before the invocation of the gods, Erichtho emits a 'catalogue of weird noises';<sup>28</sup> the nature of Medea's *verba* remain unspecified in the nurse's messenger-style account, which leaves open whether those words coincide with the formulae heard by the servant or should be identified with the speech delivered by Medea in the next scene, which stages her prayer to the forces of the Underworld.<sup>29</sup> There Medea's monologue appears, again, as an example of well-articulated speech. Apart from the topical moment of the invocation of the infernal powers (740–751), it has a long, prolix section,<sup>30</sup> in which Medea first describes in detail her past services to Hecate, then the offerings made to her and the performance of the rite, employing a sort of running commentary. Once more, she gives proof

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Senecan Medea deploys a very similar rhetorical arsenal. See also von Albrecht 2014, 719 and 738–739 (with reference to apostrophe to *animus*: in Seneca's whole production, it is limited to the characters of his tragic corpus with the exception of Cato, whose death is described in highly dramatic terms in *Prov.* 2.10) and below in these pages.

**27** More frequent in Seneca's play than in Euripides' one, where she self-names only once at line 402: see Boyle 2014, 171. On Medea's identity see e.g. Galimberti Biffino 2000 (with further useful bibliography).

**28** Braund 2008, 284. Only after delivering dissonant murmurs and sounds discordant from human tongues, which contain all possible animal and natural sounds (686–693; the half line at 693 sums them up properly: *tot rerum vox una fuit*), does Erichtho commence her direct speech invocation.

**29** Zanobi 2014, 123 notices that the two speeches, the one of the nurse and the other of Medea, respectively, both deal with the preparation of the magic potion employed to kill Creusa, thus duplicating each other. See also Boyle 2014, 313.

**30** Erichtho's sounds too in Lucan's text morph into an articulated speech, in which she threatens the Furies and Hecate for not fulfilling her prayer immediately, that is her request to revive the soul of a Roman soldier recently killed in battle (730–749).

of her ability to master language and compose elaborate speeches despite her constant state of frenzy throughout the play (*vesanus gradus*, 738).<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, although one may agree with Seneca's statement that *iracundi hominis iracunda oratio est, commoti nimis incitata, delicati tenera et fluxa* (*Ep.* 114.20) and that *ab illo* (i.e. *animo*) *sensus, ab illo verba exeunt* (22), Seneca's Medea appears to challenge such an idea of strict adherence of language to thought (what may be called 'style of mobility' to borrow Spitzer's words),<sup>32</sup> since she is and remains in full control of all her communicative acts, in spite of being *demens* (cf. for example 174) and, thus, allegedly only capable of irrational behaviour.<sup>33</sup> Medea can switch from a breathless, taut style to a more flowing one; analogously, urgent clauses alternate with a more relaxed, even 'civilised' sentence structure, while she maintains her state of emotional perturbation.<sup>34</sup> To this effect, I intend to focus now on the speeches Medea delivers in front of Creon and Jason respectively. Both scenes are introduced by the nurse's warning to Medea to rein in her feelings: *animos ... minue* at 175 has a counterpart in *animum mitiga* at 426. In both cases, she disdains the nurse's admonitions, resorting to sententious phrases in her replies, *Fortuna opes auferre, non animum potest*, 176, and *sola est quies, / mecum ruina cuncta si video obruta*, 426–427,<sup>35</sup> which bring to the fore her strong-willed personality.<sup>36</sup> Also, in both scenes there is a shift, in the dialogic exchange between the characters, from an initial very unfriendly and aggressive phase to a less tense one, in which Medea, thanks to her manipulative skills, manages to partially 'mitigate' her interlocutors' hostile disposition towards her.<sup>37</sup>

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31 As Leo notices, readers see Seneca's Medea '*furere ab initio paene per totam fabulam*'. See Costa 1973, 82.

32 Spitzer 1967, 166.

33 Anger is commonly considered as the opposite of *ratio* (see e.g. Schnell 2021, 169); however, in Seneca's tragedies an irrational state of mind often resorts to 'rational' ways of reasoning (see e.g. von Albrecht 2014, 737).

34 On the 'rationality' of Medea's anger see Müller 2014, 72–78 ('how "rational" is Medea's anger?').

35 See Costa 1973, ad loc.

36 The term *sententia* was etymologically connected to *sentio*: *sententiam veteres quod animo sensissent vocaverant* (Quint. *Inst.* 8.5.1). See Dinter 2014, *passim* and, in particular, 321–322 on the ideal correspondence between the moral character of the author and the ethical quality of his *gnomai* according to Arist. *Rhet.* 2.21.16.

37 Such a change also occurs in the Euripidean play, but with some notable differences, which will be discussed below.

Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, contends that the personal goodness (ἐπιείκεια) belonging to the speaker hugely contributes to his power of persuasion to such a point that ethos (ἦθος) constitutes the most effective means of persuasion he possesses (1356a). Now, the Senecan Medea is perfectly aware, like her Greek counterpart, that she has to face direct confrontation with adverse interlocutors, who are in a position of strength. To beat them, she will refine her argumentative capacity and stylistic devices after an initial violent confrontation.<sup>38</sup> In his letters, Seneca argues that there is an ideal correspondence, as already pointed out above, between character and *oratio*. In *Ep.* 114, he condemns Maecenas' style for being an *oratio portentosissima* (7), in which the use of *verba tam inprobe structa, tam neglegenter abiecta, tam contra consuetudinem omnium posita* (*ibid.*) is the reverberation of his quite questionable lifestyle. In light of this 'rhetorical' principle, given that reason follows nature, readers would likely expect Seneca's raging Medea to have recourse to a style against nature (*contra naturam*) and matching her moral viciousness.<sup>39</sup> However, as already hinted earlier, apart from some vehement utterances through which she gives vent to her anger during the exchange with her male interlocutors, she knows how to cleverly adjust language and style to her own ends.<sup>40</sup> Such an ability may point to the fact that Seneca's Medea, rather than being swept away by an irrational passion, actively embraces it:<sup>41</sup> hers seems to be a sort of lucid *akrasia*, in which she is perfectly aware of what she is doing, even though passion has taken over.<sup>42</sup>

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**38** Medea often acts in a rather un-Stoic way in the play (cf. Bartsch 2006, 255–258; Star 2006 and 2012; Battistella 2017 and 2021). She has 'introjected' principles of the Stoic doctrine only with a view to distorting them. This may also apply to her argumentative moves, which she exploits just to persuade her interlocutors and obtain what she wants. By contrast, it is disgraceful for the philosopher to say one thing and think another. There should be harmony between thought and word: the man who means what he says does not try to cover up his thought but to make it clear.

**39** *Orationis licentia* proves that *animi* have suffered a moral collapse (*procidisse*): cf. Sen. *Ep.* 114.11.

**40** The Euripidean Medea too is capable to produce flattering speeches (e.g. 309–312; Creon calls her words μαλθακά, 316).

**41** See Müller 2014, 73.

**42** See Müller 2014, 77–78. Medea gives herself over to her anger (*ira qua ducis sequor*, 953) since her mind has completely enslaved itself.

### 3 The encounter between Medea and Creon

Medea meets Creon at lines 179–300: they maintain a lively verbal exchange at 192–202 characterised by the presence of several rhetorical devices, such as alliteration, stichomythia, antilabe, the repetition of key words and *sententiae*, but also of legalistic terms and concepts.<sup>43</sup> Medea then speaks for almost fifty lines, starting with a speech-introduction that stands out for its particularly sophisticated syntax (203–206). Despite the employment of hyperbaton, her initial clause is neither chaotic nor emotional: there is no trace of exclamations, invocations, invectives, or unfinished sentences. It is as if she intended to put on display from the very start her oratorical ability by ‘toying’ first and foremost with complex syntax (‘a grand beginning’).<sup>44</sup> In the next lines, she draws attention to her precarious condition through a pathetic asyndeton (*expulsa supplex sola deserta*, 208),<sup>45</sup> which contributes noticeably to the simplification of the sentence structure. However, in recalling her origins and the splendour of her father’s reign, she returns to syntactical elaboration, probably owing to the narrative flavour of that passage (211–216). In those lines, readers come across syntactic inversion and tricolon with anaphora (*quodcumque ... quidquid ... quidquid...*), which carry them all the way to the end of line 216, where the climactic main verb *regit*, governing the whole previous clause, is to be found.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, there is epanadiplosis at 218–219 (*petebant / petuntur*, with variation of the active and passive voice). Medea then moves on to present herself as the saviour of the Argonauts, but she is unable to utter Jason’s name, who is referred to only indirectly and by means of a polyptoton (*nam ducum taceo ducem*, 233). Syntax becomes fragmented, parataxis and pronoun forms prevail, bringing about a rather staccato style, as in 233–235 *nam ducum taceo ducem / [...] hunc nulli imputo; / vobis revexi ceteros, unum mihi*. In confessing her guilt, thus anticipating Creon’s accusations,<sup>47</sup> Medea lays out the gist of her argument, that is the return of Jason, for whom she

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<sup>43</sup> On *parte inaudita altera* (199), see Boyle 2014, 184. Medea’s speeches may have been influenced by both the structure and legal language of *controversiae* and the persuasive characteristics of *suasoriae*. On lines 199–201, cf. Dammer 2004, 314.

<sup>44</sup> Boyle 2014, 185. The opening of her speech also serves the typical function of the *exordia*, that is *captatio benevolentiae*.

<sup>45</sup> On the pathetic function of adjectives in asyndeton cf. Dainotti 2015, 91 n. 297. There is also alliteration here, on which cf. Dainotti 2022.

<sup>46</sup> See Boyle 2014, 186.

<sup>47</sup> On Medea’s *praesumptio* and *confutatio*, see Boyle 2014, 194.

committed her crimes (*crimen*, 237; 246).<sup>48</sup> At the end of her speech, she takes on the role of *supplex* and asks, in a very humble way clashing with her previous lofty self-image (217–219), at least for a corner in the land in which to take shelter (250–251). After realising that the king is unmoved and, by contrast, intends to banish her from the city, Medea changes her strategy performing a strongly pathos-oriented argumentative move, in which she self-presents as a *moritura* mother (*fortasse moriens*, 290).<sup>49</sup> She finally brings her children into the picture, also resorting to the *topos* of (fake) feminine tears (293).<sup>50</sup>

The turning point of her speech thus occurs at lines 282–295, where she demonstrates a conscious use of words to achieve persuasion first of all by means of a formal act of supplication to Creon (cf. the employment of the *figura iuris iurandi*, common in Roman declamation,<sup>51</sup> at 285–286 *per ego auspicatos regii thalami toros / per spes futuras perque regnorum status*). By means of her rhetorical ploys, modelled after those of the Euripidean source-text,<sup>52</sup> she ultimately manages to get what she wants, that is one extra day to bid farewell to her children, which notoriously will turn into their fatal last day. The persuasive effect she aims at, therefore, hinges upon her continuous rhetorical adjustments and her *fraudes*,<sup>53</sup> whereas her emotional ‘background’ remains unvaried.<sup>54</sup> Once she has attained her goal (*unus parando dabitur exilio dies*, 295), she adds the following remark: *nimis est, recidas aliquid ex isto licet. / et ipsa propero* (296–297). In her unrequested reply, which interestingly does not have a counterpart in

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**48** The crime motif permeates the whole play. Initially, Medea seeks to justify her alleged guilt in front of Creon arguing that her only *crimen* is to have made the ship Argo return (237–238; cf. also 280 *totiens nocens sum facta, sed numquam mihi*); she later uses the same argument in front of Jason (*tua illa, tua sunt illa [scil. scelera]: cui prodest scelus / is fecit*, 500–501), ending up re-functionalising it at 563–564.

**49** On appended present participles in Senecan tragic diction, see Billerbeck 1988, 118–119; von Albrecht 2014, 724.

**50** On fake tears, see Calabrese 2021, 406–410. Medea exploits ‘the child motif’ both in her speech to Creon, on which see Dammer 2004, 319–320, and, more significantly, in the one to Jason.

**51** Boyle 2014, 203–204. As the commentator points out, she ‘is a brilliant rhetorician, whose control of the play’s language will mirror her mastery of its action’.

**52** Cf. Eur. *Med.* 340–347.

**53** This is a ‘rare successful supplication in Senecan tragedy’, as Boyle 2014, 202–203 observes. Cf. Dammer 2004, 322 on Medea’s rhetorical strategy influenced by the presence of Creon’s guards (cf. also 323 and *passim*). On persuasion and flattering speech by Medea see n. 38 above.

**54** She is never really committed to ‘educating’ her emotions, which — as the chorus points out — are always excessive, whether it is anger or love (*frenare nescit iras / Medea, non amores*, 866–867).

Euripides' play, Medea's style shows a different texture and tempo:<sup>55</sup> it gets simpler and more rapid since she has eventually reached her objective. Medea's haste to execute her plan of vengeance (*et ipsa propero*) also seems to be reflected in her urgent and ordinary style, which falls rather flat.<sup>56</sup> In other words, one may detect, rather than a correspondence between *oratio* and *vita*, a sort of consistency between the heroine's style and language and her actions or behaviour.<sup>57</sup>

## 4 The encounter between Medea and Jason

The episode of Creon and Medea is followed by a choral ode dealing with the Argonauts' journey to Colchis and the loosing of nature's bonds resulting in their violation (301–309). After the choral song, Medea is still represented as overwhelmed by anger, almost verging on madness (380–386). She asks herself which limits (*modus*, 397) she should set to her hatred, given that her passions (*amor* and *odium*) have a 'limitless' nature (*si quaeris odio, misera, quem statuas modum, / imitare amorem*, 397–398):<sup>58</sup> she is indeed the right 'prize' for the Argonautic expedition (cf. 360–363, in part. 362–363 *maiusque mari Medea malum, / merces prima digna carina*) in light of the Argonauts' analogous propensity to breach rules or pre-set limits.<sup>59</sup> As already noted, the emotion of anger never really abandons Medea across the play, but she seemingly knows how to

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<sup>55</sup> See Powell 1999, 322.

<sup>56</sup> On the overt dramatic irony of Medea's claim, see Boyle 2014, 205. On ordinary and uncoloured language, see Powell 1999, 318–319. Medea's close produces an effect of *brevitas*, on which see e.g. von Albrecht 2014, 708 (on the close of *Prov.* 6.6–8); 735–736. However, the verb *propero* may also point to the fact that the scene has reached its conclusion, as at 54 *rumpe iam segnes moras*, by means of which Medea not only highlights her impatience, but also signals the end of the prologue, as observed by Boyle 2014, 130: 'The phrase is Virgilian (*segnis / rumpe moras*, *Geo.* 3.42–43) and comes from a passage in which the poet commands himself to end his prologue and commence his subject proper. So Medea commands herself to end her prologue and begin her poetic creation proper, the dramatic action'. Analogously, such a device also occurs at the end of the encounter between Medea and Jason, after which she spurs herself on to action (566–567). Interestingly, she will regret acting too quickly at 919 and will invite her *dolor* not to rush at 1016, thus avoiding the mistake of Atreus, who repents his haste (cf. *Thy.* 1057 with Boyle 2014, 382; Battistella 2021, 107; 113)

<sup>57</sup> See Schiesaro 2003, 132 on Atreus' energy and determination.

<sup>58</sup> See Boyle 2014, 235 and *Sen. Med.* 866–867 (n. 54).

<sup>59</sup> See Boyle 2014, 225, who, however, does not correlate the Argonauts' breach of the laws of nature to Medea's lack of *modus*.



temporarily 'suspend' it, if necessary.<sup>60</sup> Thus, when Jason encounters her at 431 ff.,<sup>61</sup> he immediately notices her agitated state: *constituit animus precibus iratam aggredi. / atque ecce, viso memet exiluit, furit, / fert odia prae se: totus in vultu est dolor* (444–446). As soon as Medea catches sight of him, she starts complaining about her predicament and presents her statement of grievances characterised by a brisk and asyndetic style (cf. for example 447–449),<sup>62</sup> followed by a stream of longer and highly rhetorical sentences, in which she, replaying the same argumentative technique used in her speech to Creon, recalls to Jason the help provided in Colchis (465–467), also employing descriptive moments and linguistic devices for dramatic effect.<sup>63</sup> At lines 487–488, the repetition<sup>64</sup> (partially anaphoric) of *tibi* (3x) contributes to giving strong emphasis to her abnegation in exclusive favour of Jason:<sup>65</sup> *hos* (i.e. her brother's limbs) *quoque impendi tibi; / tibi patria cessit, tibi pater frater pudor* (cf. also 458 *quascumque aperui tibi vias, clausi mihi*, in which verb/pronoun parallelism fulfils a contrastive function). In the next antilabic section, when Jason points to Medea's anger inviting her to rein it in for the sake of their children (506), she replies using first person verbs in asyndeton hinting at passionate resolve,<sup>66</sup> which however also gesture towards cold legalistic language (*abdico eiuro abnuo — / meis Creusa liberis fratres dabit?*,

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**60** See however Müller 2014, 89 with regard to Medea's emotion: 'one should not be misled by Medea's repeated and ferocious assertions of herself and her ever-increasing anger. At the crucial junctures of the play, she is always on the verge of collapsing. In her encounter with Jason in the third act and during the prolonged successive murder of her two children in the fifth act, she has obvious difficulties to muster the anger needed for her revenge because she is confronted with counter-emotions of erotic and maternal love. Her anger does not seem to possess the excessive and lasting quality she is eager to ascribe to her own revengeful state.' See also Slaney 2019, 106–107 (the last opponent Medea must face is herself).

**61** Seneca reduces the number of meetings between Medea and Jason to just one (epilogue excluded), whereas in Euripides' play the two characters meet twice (see also above).

**62** *Fugimus, Iason, fugimus. hoc non est novum / mutare sedes; causa fugiendi nova est: / pro te solebam fugere. discedo, exeo* (Medea opts for plain style and language). Usually, asyndeton raises the emotional pitch of the sentence: see Schiesaro 2003, 131; Billerbeck 1988, 122. See also *De Subl.* 19.2 on asyndeta and anaphoras narrowly tied to the production of emotions, which, being violent movements of the soul, demand disorder.

**63** The emotional impact of description is amply acknowledged by rhetoricians (see e.g. *Rhet. ad Her.* 4.55.69; *De Subl.* 15.4; Quint. *Inst.* 6.2.29–30).

**64** On repetition as a linking element in Senecan prose cf. Traina 2011, 31. On antithesis, polarity of expression, etc. see Billerbeck 1988, *passim* and von Albrecht 2014, 724.

**65** Medea clarifies this at 500–501 *cui prodest scelus / is fecit*.

**66** As pointed out by Boyle 2014, 259.

506–507).<sup>67</sup> Such a ‘tension’ between first-person perspective and a more impersonal style also recurs within a relatively short space in this scene. Medea refers to herself in the third person three times, generating an effect of ‘sourdine pathétique’ [*pathetic muting*] — to borrow Spitzer’s words,<sup>68</sup> through which the character succeeds in both attenuating the pathetic effect and yet providing a self-aggrandising image of herself: *est et his maior metus: / Medea* (516, with alliterative anticipation of her name,<sup>69</sup> effective apposition and enjambement);<sup>70</sup> *nec ut te caede cognata inquines / Medea cogit* (523–524); (after Jason has left) ... *perge, nunc aude, incipe / quidquid potest Medea, quidquid non potest* (566–567, with an effect of *gradatio*).<sup>71</sup> In my view, this concentration of third person moments in about fifty lines might be an intimation of the fact that Medea, alongside her attempts at verbal persuasion, is seeking to establish her superiority over Jason by speaking in an impersonal and ‘detached’ manner. She therefore implements a variety of rhetorical strategies, amongst which there is obviously the one of the suppliant (*liberos tantum fugae / habere comites liceat in quorum sinu / lacrimas profundam*, 541–543; cf. also 551–552). Her request to take her children into exile with her, however, is not going to be satisfied, since Jason loves them too much<sup>72</sup> (*haec causa vitae est, hoc perusti pectoris / curis levamen. spiritu citius queam / carere, membris, luce*, 547–549). Nevertheless, Jason himself naively gives her a clue about his weak spot, their own children: *sic natos amat? / bene est, tenetur, vulneri patuit locus* (549–550). In this aside, plain style prevails to underline the rapidity of Medea’s deliberation and, thus, her ‘pragmatism’ (a similar wording recurs in the epilogue: *bene est, peractum est* [1019], once both her children have been killed). But then she again changes stylistic register,<sup>73</sup>

**67** On the three compound verbs and their prefixes, see Billerbeck 1988, 72 n. 177. Medea conjures up legal language also in the exchange between her and Creon, as already noticed above.

**68** See Spitzer 1980, 211; 222.

**69** See Boyle 2014, 261. On wordplay on Medea’s name, see Nelis 2017 (n. 7 provides further useful bibliography). See also Battistella 2017; Bexley 2022, 35–36 on Medea’s self-fashioning and *constantia* with further bibliographical references. On Medea’s shift to self-description in third-person form at 926–953, see Gill 1987, 33.

**70** See Billerbeck 1988, 116.

**71** On these lines, see Boyle 2014, cxi: ‘She has already objectified herself.’

**72** Persuasion has already failed earlier in their conversation or, rather, altercation, while she was trying to convince Jason to flee with her (cf. lines 524–537). This prompts Medea’s violent verbal reaction. She invokes Jupiter, asking him to shake the whole world and strike the guilty (either her or Jason). See Slaney 2019, 196.

**73** Medea shares some commonalities with other villains of Senecan tragedy, like Atreus, who is a ‘consummate manipulator of words, knowledge and emotions, and overpowering all others’ (Schiesaro 2003, 134).

adopting the stance of the weak, submissive, and even irrational female (551–556): let us notice the repetition of the hortative subjunctive *liceat* at 551 and 552, the conspicuous hyperbaton *suprema ... mandata* (551–552), the terminological constellation focussing, though ironically,<sup>74</sup> on final farewell and death (*suprema*, 551; *ultimum*, 552; *extrema*, 553),<sup>75</sup> through which Medea presents herself as a dying mother. She ultimately succeeds in making Jason forget her previous angry *verba*, for which her *dolor* is said to be responsible (553–556); she then concludes: *haec irae data obliterentur* (556–557).<sup>76</sup> Jason swallows the bait and, after a conciliatory response, characterised however by an ingenuous, platitudinous, and also insensitive tone, quickly departs<sup>77</sup> (557–559), leaving Medea simmering with anger. It should be noted that the Senecan Medea only invites Jason to erase her angry words, unlike the Euripidean counterpart, who, in her speech to him (on which see also briefly below) points out that *χόλος* has vanished (898; cf. also 878–879 ‘shall I not cease from my wrath?’). Although Euripides’ Medea is obviously lying, it is interesting to observe that Seneca’s Medea carefully avoids saying that her anger has disappeared, thus implying that she remains in an angry mood, as already said above. As soon as Jason exits, her style abruptly changes again, and, in her monologue, she switches to shorter sentences, rhetorical questions,<sup>78</sup> and self-exhortation; they all suggest a resurgence of indignation and rage, visibly resurfacing after Jason has left in complete forgetfulness of Medea’s services to him and his oaths to her (560–567),<sup>79</sup> an upsetting circumstance that lets Medea’s true personality ultimately take over (*excidimus tibi? / numquam excidemus*, 561–562). Her stylistic choices, starting with a sudden implicit switch of

<sup>74</sup> See Boyle 2014, 266–267.

<sup>75</sup> *Extrema* is already in Medea’s prayer to Creon (289).

<sup>76</sup> A similar manipulative strategy is implemented by the Euripidean Medea, with a different goal, though: in Euripides, she seeks to make her children remain at Corinth, in Seneca she would like to take them with her. See Mastronarde 2002, 312–313. On the colloquialism *oblitterentur*, Billerbeck 1988, 74.

<sup>77</sup> The Senecan Jason is a rather flat and passive character: see Bexley 2022, 298–299 (with further bibliography). Both Creon and Jason walk away quite in a hurry (maybe to avoid succumbing to Medea’s speech? See Dammer 2004, 321, but see also Di Benedetto 1997, 159 n. 142 on the difficult balance between word and action in ancient tragedy). On Jason’s reply, see Boyle 2014, 267–268.

<sup>78</sup> On the effect of *Emotionalisierung* {emotionalisation} brought about by this type of questions, see Billerbeck 1988, 123. Interrogations and self-interrogations are amongst the most notable features of the sublime, on which see *De Subl.* 18.1–2 and Schiesaro 2003, 131 and n. 132. Interestingly, the rhetorical methods of self-manipulation of Seneca’s characters resemble those of philosophical self-education in his prose writings (see von Albrecht 2004, 738).

<sup>79</sup> On Jason’s memory, see Boyle 2014, 268–269.

the person in the verbs at 560 *discessit. itane est? vadis oblitus mei (scil. Jason)*, signal her emotional involvement and give a pathetic colour to her speech.<sup>80</sup> She then, without any further hesitation, turns to self-instruction and self-exhortation mode (562–563; 566–567), staccato style and sententious sentences enhanced by polyptoton (e.g. *fructus est scelerum tibi / nullum scelus putare*, 563–564).<sup>81</sup> Such sophisticated rhetorical scaffolding also injects novelty into the Greek model, upon which Seneca draws; he, however, compresses in one single moment what in Euripides' *Medea* is split into two distinct scenes (lines 623–626, staging Medea's outburst against Jason when he leaves after their altercation; and lines 869–893, representing Medea's reconciliatory *Trugrede* ['deception speech'] to Jason), thus coming to confer greater prominence to the heroine's utterances in the Latin version.

## 5 Conclusion

In Seneca's plays, style demands attention especially as a powerful medium to communicate a variety of psychic states (no matter whether 'real' or contrived) of his characters. In particular, some stylistic choices, such as hyperbata, anaphoras, or asyndeta, but also wordplays, are often directly correlated to the destructive force of the characterisation, as with Medea's case. As Mastronarde points out with specific reference to Seneca's *Oedipus*, 'the words are dramatic vehicles of the basically uniform moods of gloom, horror, and abnormality'.<sup>82</sup> He singles out a consistent network of words and images associated with the central figure of that play, Oedipus, whose mental-emotional situation and personality are brought to the fore by means of pointed imagery (for example that of entanglement and confusion) and vocabulary (recurring thematic words dealing with impiety), so that a sick situation is made to revolve around a sick individual. In the Senecan *Medea* too, the themes of evil are verbalised<sup>83</sup> through imagery (for example parturition, as signalled above) and language, whereof style is a constitutive component. As I have sought to show above, Medea bends it to her own goals (to attack or persuade her interlocutors, to give vent

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**80** On the change in verbal person cf. Billerbeck 1988, 240.

**81** See von Albrecht 2014, 733–734.

**82** See Mastronarde 1970, 301 and *passim*.

**83** See Mastronarde 1970, 315.

to her rage, to spur herself on to action),<sup>84</sup> never giving up the *ira* by which she is already pervaded in the prologue.<sup>85</sup> Thus, Medea's ability to produce speech acts not strictly mirroring her 'true' character challenges Seneca's statement in *Ep.* 114.3 centred on the correspondence between the *color* of *animus* and that of *ingenium*: *non potest alius esse ingenio, alius animo color. Si ille sanus est, si compositus, gravis, temperans, ingenium quoque siccum atque sobrium: illo vitato hoc quoque adflatur* (see also above). On the contrary, Medea proves to be capable of bringing about different rhetorical styles despite allegedly having the same *animus*.

Her speeches, while often modelled after those of the Euripidean equivalent, showcase the new personality with which Seneca has endowed her character. Such an operation implies not only the imitation of the illustrious model, but also the creation of a new (literary) individual who tailors language and style to her own patterns of thought. In both epilogues, the heroine rides off in her chariot. The two scenes, however, display a remarkable difference, in that Seneca's Medea hands the corpses of her two children back to Jason (she may even have thrown them down at his feet),<sup>86</sup> whereas the Euripidean character takes the dead children with her in the chariot to give them burial. Apart from the striking dramaturgic difference in the two plays, it might be interesting to notice that the last words spoken by Seneca's Medea contain an imperative form: *recipe iam natos, parens* (1024). There are several imperative forms in the final agon between Medea and Jason (997 ff.) and Jason too uses them, but he generally does so in a begging tone, whereas she imparts orders, thus coming to dominate the scene until the very end also from the verbal standpoint. Being in control of her own soul for most of the time,<sup>87</sup> Seneca's Medea is also in

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**84** Interestingly, Seneca's Medea deploys her own form of 'inwardness language' (*intus*), to borrow the phrase from Traina 2011: cf. *Med.* 46–47 *tremenda caelo pariter ac terris mala / mens intus agitat*; 917–918 *nescioquid ferox / decrevit animus intus*. Her interiority is however scrutinised only to practice evil (cf. also n. 88 below).

**85** Full-blown emotions are a common trait of Seneca's plays: his characters never really undergo a process of transformation or gradually discover things about themselves. Oedipus' guilt, for example, 'is implicit in the imagery from the prologue on', as Mastronarde 1970, 314 observes, a circumstance that, therefore, rules out the process of *Enthüllung* {'disclosure'} of the Greek model.

**86** See e.g. Battistella 2017, 270 n. 14.

**87** On Medea's oscillations and her conflicting emotions, cf. however Müller 201, 88–91.

control of her actions, speeches, and style, although her self-possession is totally applied in the service of evil.<sup>88</sup>

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**88** Her character seems to gesture quite provocatively towards the positive Stoic notion of self-possession (*se habere, suum esse*, on which see Lotito 2001), which Seneca discusses in his philosophical works: cf. e.g. *Ep.* 14.3 *ex omnibus nihil nos magis concutit quam quod ex aliena potentia pendet* (the only inalienable thing is the possession of one own's soul). Medea often harangues herself into action in the play, eventually coming to lay claim to her own identity (*Medea nunc sum*, 910), which testifies to her steady self-possession. Also, she appears to play, in the usual provocative way, with another aspect particularly dear to Senecan philosophy, that is the language of inwardness (cf. also n.84 above): when she says that she is going to probe her vitals with her sword to check whether another baby still lurks in her womb (*scrutabor ense viscera*, 1013), she somehow distorts Seneca's philosophical notion of inwardness, *me scrutor*, on which see Traina 1964, 626 and *passim* and Traina 2011, 11; 15, 17. Cf. also line 969 *mihi me relinque*, in which Medea begs the ghost of her brother Absyrtus to depart, thus rendering her the exclusive executor of her own revenge: the use of a reflexive verb + dative is quite common in the Senecan philosophical corpus to solicit withdrawal into oneself (e.g. Traina 1964, 628). On Seneca's Medea twisting Stoic precepts in her pursuit of an unStoic *sapientia* ('antisapientia'), see Galimberti Biffino 2000, 88.

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